DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 808 FL 021 073

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TITLE The Emergence of a Definite Article in Montagnais? The Truth of the Linguists vs. the Trust of the Natives.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Canada Natives; Cree; *Determiners (Languages); Diachronic Linguistics; Foreign Countries; Grammar; *Language Patterns; *Linguistic Theory; *Native Speakers; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS Canada; *Montagnais (Cree)

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the existence of a definite article in Montagnais, an Algonquian language spoken by about 6,000 Canada natives. The language has not yet been totally described, and teachers, who must create their own instructional materials for Montagnais language instruction, are unsure as to whether to teach their own usage or what they are told by linguists. No description of a definite article system has ever been included in the language's grammar. However, analysis of Montagnais now suggests that it does have such a form, and that it differs enough from French not to have been borrowed from it. Comparison of frequency of usage of the definite article and demonstratives in this and other languages support this hypothesis. Others argue that because the definite article is much more frequent in the speech and writing of younger people, it is just emerging. This perspective is supported by an analysis of pupils' retelling, in writing, of an elder's story but not by frequency data from the spontaneous speech of elderly Montagnais monolinguals. It is concluded that the explicit grammar reflects more the incomplete construct of linguists than the real usage of the language. (MSE)

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The emergence of a definite article in Montagnais? The truth of the Linguists vs the trust of the Natives.

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Montagnais is an Algonquian language affiliated to Eastern Cree. It is spoken on the North Shore of Saint-Lawrence River in Quebec by some 6.000 speakers spread on 10 reserves or so. The data I will expose to analysis come from Betsiamites, a community of 1,200 speakers, 100% of which declare to have Montagnais as their mother tongue and home first language of use. 85% of them declare to be French-Montagnais bilingual. Actually, except the preschool children and a few very old persons every one is bilingual.

When they enter school, children are taught mainly in French. Montagnais as a language course exist since 1972 however. In the early 80s, and over a period of four years only, an experimental program offered entire education in the mother tongue to children from grade 1 to grade 4 inclusively. During that period started an intensive era of course material production.

Problematic

The problem though remains that Montagnais has not yet been totally described. so teachers must rely on incomplete grammars to create their own teaching material. It should be mentioned that these teachers, who have a B.Ed. were introduced to the existing grammatical description of their language in a very schematical way. More over, they do not read English and hence do not have access to most of the scientific literature on their language. Hence the question is, when they teach Montagnais L1, what do they teach, their own use of the language or what they have been told by linguists about their language?

One example of that problem is the case of the Montagnais definite article. From Bloomfield on and untill very recently no research had

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[1]The research for this paper was made possible by the SSHRCC #410-90-1056 grant for a project entitled *La dynamique du changement dans une langue en péril.* I am also indepted to the Faculty of Arts of York University for its additional support.

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been done about the existence of such a category in the Cree languages.

And consequently no description of a definite article system was ever included in the grammatical descriptions of these languages. When asked about the existence of a definite article in Cree or in Montagnais, linguists and native teachers were unanimous: **there was no definite article in these languages.**

First in collaboration with Monica Axelsson at Stocholm's University in 1987, then by myself in Quebec in 1990-1991 I made reseach on the subject. This brought evidence that Montagnais **was** a definite article language. I presented my results at the 23rd Algonquian Conference held in London 1991. The set of semantico-functional rules as they appear in table 1 show that Montagnais definite article system differs enough from the French one not to have been borrowed from that language:

1)	if	an entity has a referential definite status in the relevant universe of discourse	
	then	it obeys the construction (DEF ART + NP)	
	wether or not	the NP is	a common noun a proper noun including place names a possessed noun
	provided that	it is not a	title/vocative partitive/mass noun noun complementizer [and ev. direct object]
2)	if	an entity has a referential indefinite status in the relevant universe of discourse	
	then	it obeys the construction	Ø + NP

Table 1. Semantico-functional rules for the use of definite articles in Montagnais.

Beside this set of rules what convinced Algonquianists most about the existence of a definite article in Montagnais was the comparative frequencies among languages as they appear in table 2:

Language	DEF ART	DEM
Finnish	nil	2.27 %
French	39.8 %	3.30 %
Italian	40.2 %	6.87 %
Swedish	49.5 %	3.77 %
German	55.0 %	7.07 %
Montagnais	**55 % DEF + NP**	**2.9 % NP + DEM**

Table 2. Frequencies in the use of definite articles and demonstratives among languages.

DET + NP indicates that this construction should correspond to the definite article in the language, while the reverse construction of NP + DET should correspond to the demonstrative marker. The 55 % reflects the average frequency found in the overall Montagnais data, mentionless of age, sex, dialect, style, type of discourse, etc. totalizing 11.100 words and 45 speakers.

On these basis Algonquianists accepted the idea of a definite article in Montagnais, but, as it was the first description of it and as the language is presently going through a catastrophic period of linguistic change, most of them emitted the hypothesis that the definite article was in mere emergence. Actually one frequent comment from the linguistic consultant and among native language teachers, technolinguists and translators is that the use of the noun determiners, i.e. definite articles, is not obligatory and that it is much more frequent in the Youngsters' discourse than in the Elders'. It is seen as sheer redundancy due to overemphasizing practices.

When I wrote the abstract for the present paper I had not yet calculated the frequencies shown on the last line of table 2 and I was therefore under the impression that the above mentioned hypothesis had good chances to be correct.

In order to measure this hypothetical increasement in the frequency of the use of the DEF from generation to generation I made the following experimentation. I asked the Montagnais teacher for grade 7 to read a tale to her students (3 groups = 58 children) and to ask them to write it down later on as a homework.

Data

The tale chosen by the teacher to be read in class was an editted version of a transcription of a tale told by an Elder (72 in 1983). I don't know what the term *edited* hides but it is expected to be a slight simplification of the sentence structure and erasing of what the teacher considered as oral discourse redundancy. Consciously or not, by chance or not, the teacher choose a text that shows, after "editing" afrequency of DEF lower than any other text I have ever seen i.e. only 32% of the NPs occur with a DEF compared to an average of 55% for the overall Montagnais data (as shown in table 2).

Comparing the frequencies between the teacher's version and the children's versions the results were as shown in table 3:

Teacher's tale	32% of NPs have a DEF
Students' versions	54 % of NPs have a DEF

Table 3. Compared frequencies for DEF/NPs in teacher's and students' texts.

This effectively reinforced the hyposthesis that the DEF was in progression from one generation to another.

Then I went to Betsiamites to discuss the case with my informant, who is 46 years old, native speaker of course, has lived all her life on the reserve, beside short stays in town during her part time B.Ed. studies. She is now the person in charge for the amerindianisation program and belongs to the Education Service in the Band Council. After a short briefing on the question of the definite article which she new nothing about (I didn't tell her about the emergence hypothesis but I showed her table 1 and 2) she said that she perceived what I meant and that in fact teens and children used a lot more DEF than Elders. She said that according to her intuition she would say that Elders used DEF only to give a little more contour to some parts of their discourse, to make it "nicer" while teens and children would use it everywhere. Asked if she would qualify the Youngsters' use as incorrect she answered: «No, maybe a bit exagerated but surely not incorrect.»

ANALYSIS

I- Teacher's version of the tale

Then we looked at the teacher's version of the tale and she felt that even that piece of discourse showed a quite high frequency of DEF for an Elders' discourse. She said most of these DEF were not obligatory. I asked her to mark all the ones she considered redundant. Among 60 NPs, 19 had a DEF. She crossed off 14 of them, leaving the text with a frequency of only 8.3% of DEF/NPs which would be the frequency of a language with a very high rate of DEM but not of a DEF-language (see table 2).

Then she mentioned that there could also be much more DEF than there were in reality, were it a teens' discourse. So I asked her to indicate all the slots were a DEF could be used. Over the 19 that already existed she indicated 28 other possible slots for a DEF to appear. If all these slots would be filled then the frequency of DEF/NPs would reach 78% These frequencies appear in table 4.

Percentage of DEF/NP in teacher's 'adapted' text	**=**	**31.6%**
Highest possible frequency for DEF + NP (= Youngster's imaginary discourse)	=	78.3%
Lowest possible frequency for DEF + NP (= Elder's imaginary discourse)	=	8.3%

Table 4. Possible variation in the frequency of DEF according to a middle age speaker

II. Children's text

I then asked the informant to read the children's texts (for one class = 20 students) and to classify them as good or bad. I specified that she should not take the orthography into account, but she should consider only the clarity and the grammaticality. The results were as follows:

1)	The average frequency in the text classified as of good students (which corresponds to the average overall frequency shown in table 2)	was	56% DEF/NP
	Highest frequency		75% DEF/NP
	Lowest frequency		41% DEF/NP
2)	The average frequency in the text classified as of bad students	was	43% DEF/NP
	Highest frequency		67% DEF/NP
	Lowest frequency		12% DEF/NP

NOTE: The informant commented this 12% DEF/NP text by saying "Very difficult to read".

The interpretation of those frequencies is that students whose average frequency is higher are considered better speakers (writers) than students whose average frequency is lower. It is not sure if there is a link between the low frequency of DEF and the opacity of those texts. Yet, it is likely that there is a link since one function of Montagnais DEF is anaphoric recall of participants. A text not making correct or even sufficient use of these markers necessarily ends up with being unclear. Example (1) illustrates a sample of a good student text:

(1) Excerpt of a typical child's discourse
(Chantal Tshernisk 13 years old, 63% DET/NPs)

Tshi-Shan	ka natuapamat	kamatshishit.		Ekue	itat		**ne**	Tshi-Shan
Johnny	goes to meet	devil		Then	he-says		the	Johnny
ma tshipaiuin	shunialu	iteu	**ne** Tshi-Shan.	Eshe	ekue	itakuat		
Oh! I want	money	says	the Johnny	Yes	then	he is told-by-him		
ne kamatshishilit.	Nituassimat	tshika tshiuetaut.		Ekuan miam		iteu		
the devil	My children	will bring-it		That's very good		says		
ne Tshi-Shan	**nelu** kamatshishilit.	Ek	**ne** Tshi-Shan	mishta		peshikashteu		
the Johnny	the devil	Then	the Johnny	a lot		he beats them		

nelu kamatshishissat.	Ek	**nitshen** kamatshishisssat	ekue uitamuatau	utauia.
the little devils	then	the little devils	then they return to their father.	

«Johnny goes to meet the devil. Then Johnny says to him: "Oh! I want money!" he says Johnny. "OK" he is then told by the devil. "My children will bring it [to your place]." "That's very good" says Johnny to the devil. Then Johnny beats the little devils a lot. Then the little devils return to their father.»

III. Older speakers frequencies

The next logical stage after that was to go back to older speakers's spontanous discourse and to check if their frequency was so much lower than the one in the children's discourse or even in the teacher's adapted version. I took oral data from 1980 (Drapeau-Betsiamites corpus) and looked at three speakers who were in 1980 respectively 60, 79 and 97 which gives an average age of 78.6 year. These speakers were held to be Montagnais monolinguals and indeed their discourse was 100% Montagnais monolingual.

The frequency of DEF/NP in the older speakers' discourse (shown in table 6) was respectively:
:

1st speaker	60 years old	63%
2nd speaker	79 years old	42 %
3rd speaker	97 years old	55%
with an average of		**53.4% DEF/NP**

Table 6. Elders' frequency in the use of DEF.

This frequency corresponds exactly to the good students' average frequency and to the overall frequency. Example (2) illustrates a sample of an Elder's spontaneous discourse:

(2) Excerpt of a typical spontaneous Elder's discourse
(Speaker 82-12-16-18 72 years old, 63 % DET/NPs)

[...]	ekut	neppitshit	mush	ekue		nippitshit	**ne** mush	[...];
	it's there	we-shoot s.t.	moose	then		we-kill s.t.	the moose;	

tshietshishepau	ma ne	neu-tipaikan	ueniat	eukun ai	ekue
on-next day	so	4 o'clock	when-we-woke	this-is	then

mutshet	**ne** nimushiminan	**ne** utakushit	**ne** ninippiatan	**ne** mush.
we-ate	the our-moose	the day-before	the we-killed	the moose.

"[...] it's there that we shot at a moose, then we killed the moose [that morning]; and so, on next day, at four o'clock,when we woke, it's then that we ate our moose, the moose we had killed the day before [...]"

CONCLUSION

1) Even though the use of DEF is claimed to be almost unexistant in the Elders' discourse (8 %) and very frequent in the Youngsters' discourse (78 %), the data show that the average frequencies are absolutely the same in both groups.

2) As the native teachers and the native language consultants were never told by the linguists that there was a DEF in the Montagnais language (they were probably told on the contrary that there was NO DEF in Montagnais) they are puzzled by the idea of its existence. They think of it either as of a new phenomena or as of a mere stylistic device.

3) The explicit grammar the educated natives (teachers) have in their mind reflects more the incomplete construct of the linguists than the real usage of the language (even in its most classical manifestation, I mean by this the language of very old monolingual speakers).

And this shows once again that the strongest argument is always the best...